

Waffles, Planes and Automobiles by darthstormer

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Summary: The same dark-haired stranger has been unknowingly throwing off Jane Hopper's entire day, and all she wants to do is get on the plane and head home for Thanksgiving. The universe has other plans, and she comes to find that first impressions might not at all be what they seem. One-Shot, Modern AU

Waffles, Planes and Automobiles

"We will now begin our general boarding for United flight 389 to Indianapolis, at Gate N7."

"Finally," thought an exhausted Jane Hopper as the voice crackled over the intercom. It had been a long day – a long few days actually – and she still had a flight and a long drive before it would truly be over. It was Tuesday afternoon, just a couple days before Thanksgiving, and she was ready to be home.

She had come to the aspiring writers conference in Seattle looking for a fresh start. Writing had always been a dream of hers, but one she had relegated to the back of her mind, certain she didn't have either the talent or the fresh ideas that would make it anything more than a hobby. Her father had always encouraged her to chase the dream, to pursue the things that made her happy, and to trust that she had more ability than she gave herself credit for. Even if she fell in the process, she needed to get back up and keep going.

The last year had been a struggle and his words finally sank in, so she decided to take a chance and come to the conference. The speakers and the workshop sessions were enjoyable, and she actually had a few ideas to start pursuing once she was home, but the rest of the conference was too overwhelming. She was never one for crowds, and collectively, the group had too much ego despite being unpublished - one of the principle restrictions for the attendees. She had lost count of how many people had talked about the stacks of manuscripts they had already sent out, ones that they were certain the major publishing houses were in a secret bidding-war over. Confidence was a good thing; arrogance, she couldn't stand.

The hotel was fancy - nothing she would ever be able to afford without the special conference rate - but she always had a hard time sleeping anywhere that wasn't home. The one bright point she had to look forward to each day, were the waffles the hotel included as part of their breakfast spread in the lobby. Every morning she was down there bright and early, helping herself to two of the fluffy treats, topped with whipped-cream and strawberries, and just letting her mind drift off and reminisce about simpler times. Waffles held a

special place in her heart; a constant reminder of her father. Growing up, whatever else was going on, wherever they might be, Saturday mornings were when she and her father would have waffles.

Today, however, had been a bit of a disaster. She started out on the wrong foot by sleeping right through her alarm, and had to shower and dress in a rush. Since she was checking out, that also meant taking the time to pack, and leaving her things with the front desk during the final morning events of the conference. She got to breakfast just in time to see someone snag the last two waffles from the platter and she had to content herself with a bagel instead. It was irrational, she knew that, but she couldn't help but glance over with a hateful glare and watch the man eating *her waffles*.

She had seen him a few times at the conference, the man with the mop of black hair that seemed to refuse all attempts to tame it. The man with the deep brown eyes that sparkled when the light caught them just right - not that she let herself notice things like that. He gave off a shy, quiet air - much like she knew she did - but an underlying confidence that told her, when the chips were down, he could be trustworthy and protective. She tried her best to force those thoughts from her mind; that's not what coming to this conference was about. Besides, he was eating *her waffles*.

When the conference wrapped up following lunch, their paths crossed again. After retrieving her suitcase from the concierge desk at the hotel, Jane went out front to catch a taxi to the airport. A whole line of cars had sat waiting for passengers when she entered the lobby a few minutes before, but now, as she stepped onto the curb, she watched the last one pull away, that familiar black mop sitting obliviously in the back seat. Again, she couldn't really blame him, he'd done nothing wrong and another taxi pulled up just minutes later, but it was the principle of the thing.

That was all behind her now, she tried to remind herself. She pushed the conference and the hotel and the man who stole her waffles to the back of her mind as she gathered her purse and handed her ticket over to the boarding agent at the gate, who scanned it and wished her a pleasant flight. Walking down the jetway toward the waiting plane, she looked over the ticket again, confirming her seat assignment. As if the universe were conspiring against her, she

realized she would be stuck in a middle-seat for the next five hours. Stepping carefully down the aisle of the plane, she scanned the overhead bins until she found her row and then glanced down.

"No. It can't be," she thought.

She checked her ticket: 9-B. She looked up at the bins: 9-A-C. She looked at the man sitting in seat A, watching the ground crew out the window. Fifty thousand people were leaving Seattle on hundreds of flights this afternoon, and she was stuck sitting next to the man who finished off the waffles. She reminded herself, yet again, it had been an innocent action and not something he had done wrong, or intentionally, and she was going to have to let it go. Settling into the middle seat, Jane busied herself by tucking away her purse and buckling her seatbelt, hoping somehow they could pass the flight without him noticing her. Of course, that wasn't going to happen.

"Hi," he said as he turned to greet whoever had joined him, his face lighting up with recognition as he saw who had sat down. "Oh, hi! You were at the conference, right?"

Fighting an inward groan of disappointment, Jane pulled on a smile she hoped looked genuine and greeted her seat-mate.

"Hi. Yeah, I thought you looked familiar, too."

"Well, good to see a familiar face," he said, a little awkwardly. "I'm Mike."

"Uh, I'm Jane," she returned, beginning to panic that he was going to want to talk the whole flight. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too, Jane," he smiled back, and then after a pause, offered, "Would you like the window seat? I know the middle can be annoying. The leg room isn't any better over here, but it's a little better view."

Jane was taken aback by the polite gesture, disarmed at his thoughtfulness. She declined his offer with a smile, but could feel just the slightest crack forming in her opinion of the man. Even if he took the last of the waffles, and the last taxi, maybe there was a chance

Mike wasn't all bad.

They made small-talk until the plane began to push back from the gate, and the flight attendants began their safety briefing. She realized with a small grin that, where most people had already tuned out, Mike was following along with the laminated card from his seat-back pocket. She didn't want to admit to herself it was actually just a little bit cute. She didn't want to admit that this man, who she had spent all day forming a negative opinion of, might actually be a decent guy. It didn't matter, of course. In a few hours they would land in Indianapolis and go their separate ways; her, back home to Hawkins and him, probably on to a connecting flight to anywhere else.

As the plane turned on to the runway and began to spool up the engines for takeoff, Jane began to regret the large, iced coffee she drank while waiting for the flight, and for not hitting the restroom one more time before boarding. Now she knew she had at least a twenty minute wait before the seatbelt light would be turned off, so all she could do was sit back and try not to think about it. To distract herself, she glanced past Mike and out the window, watching the world fall quickly away as they climbed into the clouds. She couldn't help but notice that he had pulled out a small notebook, and was jotting down ideas in short, clipped sentences, with handwriting so haphazard she wasn't sure even he would be able to read it back. She wondered just what sort of story ideas he was hashing out, anxious to get out her own notebook once her bladder wasn't completely occupying her mind.

The captain kept everyone seated longer into the flight than usual, as they climbed through a pocket of bad turbulence, but eventually the light turned off and Jane was on her feet. Slipping past the man in the aisle seat with an apology, she made her way to the restroom at the front of the plane and was relieved to find that, for once today, no one had beaten her to it. Her relief was short-lived as she made her way back to her seat, only to realize the drink cart had already made its way past their row.

"Yeah, that's about right," she thought as she settled back into her seat, realizing Mike had not one, but two drinks sitting on his tray-table.

"Diet Coke or ginger ale?" he asked, as she re-fastened her seatbelt.

"Huh?" she asked, puzzled at the question.

"When I saw you weren't going to make it back in time for the drink cart, I got two. I took a chance you'd like one of these."

"Wow, um, I'll take the Coke then," she said, flustered as a pink blush tinged her cheeks. "Thank you. That was really thoughtful."

It was Mike's turn to blush as he watched her pick up the cup, pleased that he had made the right choice, and relieved she hadn't been completely creeped out that he had done it. Deciding she could let herself lighten up just a little, Jane asked Mike about what had brought him to the conference. Like her, he had always had an interest in writing and an overactive imagination that needed some kind of outlet. His parents had warned him it would be a struggle to make any kind of living at it; not discouraging the idea, but not exactly encouraging it, either. He had gone to school for an accounting degree and regretted it almost as soon as he graduated. He had a head for numbers, but he just couldn't get excited about ledgers and tax forms. He confessed he didn't have any clear stories in mind, yet, just a lot of detailed scenes he was trying to work into more coherent narratives in one of his two favorite genres - either science-fiction or fantasy.

"How about you?" he asked. "What will Jane's first best-seller be about?"

For just a moment, she felt herself start to go on the defensive until she realized he wasn't teasing with his question. Relaxing again, she laid out the idea that was solidifying in her mind. She had always loved a good mystery novel, spending her childhood pouring over her father's detective paperbacks. Her idea took inspiration from Nancy Drew, but with a bit of a twist. The teen-detective Jane had in mind, has the ability to find people inside her head, to follow the bad-guys and listen in on their plans. Of course, nobody knows her secret except the boy next door, her best friend since kindergarten.

"I'm not sure yet," she shrugged, "Maybe there will be a bit of a will-they / won't-they threaded in the background, that sells these days,

right?"

Jane couldn't believe she was suddenly opening up so much, especially with a premise she wasn't completely confident on. Mike had a disarming quality that made him easy to talk to, and she realized he was listening with rapt attention.

"I can't wait to buy that," he said, glancing down at his notebook full of ideas not nearly so well formed.

Again, she didn't detect any hint of sarcasm in what he had said; he genuinely wanted to read the story she had described. In just a few minutes he had given her a bigger shot of confidence in the idea than the entire conference.

The flight attendants came back up the aisle, this time with sandwiches and other light-snack options for purchase. They both opted for turkey sandwiches, a decision they regretted almost immediately. The meat was dry and paper-thin and there was nearly a salads-worth of lettuce piled on the soggy bread.

"Just more to look forward to on Thanksgiving, right?" Mike joked. "My mom always makes way too big of a turkey, so it's sandwiches for a solid week afterwards."

They were still discussing the upcoming holiday, and Mike had just revealed that Indianapolis was, in fact, the final stop for him as well, when there was a sudden commotion on the other side of the plane. Voices from a few rows back were saying something about a fire, and Jane looked around nervously for the source of the panic. At almost the same time, a shudder began to pulse through the plane and they started banking to the right, the nose pointing downward into a shallow dive. By the time word had spread to their row what had happened, the immediate danger was over and the pilot came on the overhead speakers, unnervingly calm, to explain the situation. In short, there had been a fire in the engine on the right wing. The fire was out and the plane was otherwise fine, but they would be making an emergency landing in Billings, MT rather than continuing on to Indiana.

Jane breathed a sigh of relief as the pilot switched the intercom off,

and only then did she realize she had grabbed Mike's hand in the initial panic. She started to pull it back with a blush, and he gave it a gentle, reassuring squeeze before letting go.

"Sorry," she apologized, embarrassed.

"It's alright," he comforted. "I probably would have grabbed your hand too, if you hadn't done it first."

Jane tried her best to calm her breathing, but the momentary alarm had left her shaken.

"We'll be alright." Mike said, glancing back out the window. "They build these planes to fly just fine with only one engine. Heck, that other one could fall off the wing completely and we'd be just fine."

He saw the color drain from her face, and quickly apologized. "I'm so sorry, that sounded a lot more comforting in my head."

Jane couldn't help but let out a small laugh at his failed attempt, and she had to admit, she did feel just a little bit better. The last few minutes of the flight were comfortably uneventful and ended with one of the smoothest landings she had ever experienced. The plane rolled to a stop far from the airport terminal and the fire crew raced up to begin assessing the situation, dousing the engine in flame-retardant foam as a precaution. The passengers were unloaded and bussed to the terminal, where the next few hours were spent being shuffled from one official to another. Everyone got checked out by paramedics as a precaution, likely more for the airline's benefit, attempting to avoid lawsuits. People were reunited with their baggage, handed meal vouchers, and passed around to flustered ticket agents who attempted to fit them onto other flights.

Exhausted and nibbling on a sandwich that was only slightly better than the one still at her seat on the plane, Jane settled into a hard plastic chair in the terminal, ready to wait out the night. With it being the busiest travel week of the year, combined with a snowstorm snarling up airports along the East-coast, open seats on other flights were hard to come by. They had been able to get her on a plane out to Denver tomorrow afternoon and from there, finally a flight home Thursday evening, with a standby option for an earlier

one if there was a no-show. It was far from ideal, but she didn't have any other options.

She had lost track of Mike shortly after getting off the bus, as everyone was sent in different directions to get checked out. She hadn't given him much thought while she was focused on making her new arrangements, either. Now that plans were set and all she could do was wait, she found herself glancing around the terminal, wondering what had become of him. She couldn't help but smile when she saw him walking over, towing along his suitcase, and dropped into the empty seat next to her.

"Any luck?" he asked, nodding at the new airline tickets in her hand.

"Not really," she admitted, explaining the round-about way she would be getting home, and the extensive waits in between.

"Yeah, I got the same runaround. They actually have me going back to Seattle, then Chicago before finally taking a short hop to Indianapolis. I figure I'll make it home just in time for Christmas." he said with a wry chuckle.

Jane couldn't help but laugh along in sympathy, knowing he had been anxious to make it home for Thanksgiving dinner with his family.

"Yeah," he continued. "spending a few nights in the airport and bouncing back and forth across the country doesn't exactly sound appealing, and maybe I'm a little more shook up about the incident than I'd like to admit. In either case, I'm thinking of going down to the rental desk and getting a car and just driving instead. Google says it's about a 20 hour drive straight through; plenty of room to get there in time for dinner if I don't make too many stops."

Jane gave a non-committal smile. It sounded like a good idea, and if she had the money she might do it too. As it was, she had scrimped and saved just to make this trip and didn't have much left for alternate plans. Part of her found she was hesitant to see Mike go, but maybe it was for the best. She had decided a long time ago it was better not to let people in, to let them get too close. When you opened yourself up to people, it just hurt that much worse when they

eventually left. In the end, everyone leaves, so why bother? Besides, she tried to convince herself, he talked way too much, even if she couldn't get enough of his enthusiastic voice. And the way his messy mop of black hair was always falling down across his forehead, distracting her from that engaging sparkle in his deep, brown eyes. And he ate her waffles.

"Stop it, Jane," she chastised herself.

"Anyway," Mike continued. "I was wondering, I mean, since we're going the same way. Would you, maybe, want to come with me?"

She looked back at him, stunned that he actually wanted her to come along.

"I would, but..." she paused, ducking her head. "I can't really afford it."

Mike's eyes went wide, realizing the spot he had inadvertently put her in.

"Sorry, I didn't mean you had to pay to come along. I'm going, either way. I just...I don't know. I just kind of wanted someone along to talk to while I drove, so I'm not talking to myself for fifteen-hundred miles. And maybe to take a few hours behind the wheel when I need a rest. The car, gas, and food along the way are all on me; all it will cost you is listening to me ramble on, which you've already been doing for free all afternoon."

Jane smiled then, warming quickly to the idea. It would get her home faster, and it would be a little bit of an adventure; maybe something would come out of it she could write about. It did sound better than living in the airport for the next few days, and there was probably only a 10% chance Mike was secretly a serial killer who befriended women on flights in the off-chance they wound up stranded in the middle of nowhere and had to drive.

"Alright," she said with a grin. "If you're sure you want me along, I'm in."

He gave her a smiling nod, and together they gathered their bags and

walked down to the rental desk, that part of the airport mostly deserted as it was nearing 11:00. At the Hertz desk, Mike signed for a little four-door Chevy; big enough for their luggage but something that would still go gentle on the fuel as they had a long drive ahead of them. After stopping at a gas-station to top off and grab a pair of Cokes, they hit the road. It was quickly decided the co-pilot would deal with music and maps, so Jane pulled out her phone and helped guide Mike toward the Interstate. Looking over their route, she realized now that the current highway would take them more than half-way home, so the navigation job was easy enough. Turning to the radio, she scanned for a while until she found something peppy but not obnoxious and then settled back in her seat, getting comfortable for the next few hours.

Setting the cruise control and getting more comfortable himself, Mike glanced over at Jane, ready to pick the conversation back up where they left off hours before.

"So what brought you to the conference?" he asked. "I mean, I know for the same reason as the rest of us, it just feels like you already have a firm grasp on what you want to write. If you can put something down on paper half as good as what you were describing, you'll have no trouble hitting the best-seller charts."

Jane blushed at the compliment and thought for a minute, weighing out how honest to be with her answer.

"Scoping out the competition, I guess," she answered with a chuckle before getting serious. "No, not exactly that. Writing is something I've always wanted to try my hand at, I just haven't trusted I would be any good at it. For my own confidence, I needed to meet other people who are also just starting out, and go to a few workshops, to see if it's just a pipe-dream or something I actually have a shot at. Growing up, my Dad always said I spent more time in my imagination than reality, so I should start trying to bring my ideas to life. He spent years telling me to give it a shot, to take a chance before life passes me by, and I finally decided he was right."

"Sounds like a smart man," Mike complimented.

"Yeah," Jane agreed with a small smile, "pretty smart."

They rode in silence for a few minutes, Jane lost in memories she didn't really want to deal with, and Mike keeping focused on the road. A light drizzle had started and he glanced down at the temperature readout on the dash to make sure he wouldn't have to contend with ice. It was above freezing at the moment, but he would keep an eye on it as the night went on. Finally, Mike broke the silence again.

"Well, based on everyone else I met there, you've got nothing to worry about. Your Dad is right; your ideas are great."

"Thanks," she said softly, looking over and giving him a smile, not trusting herself to respond further.

She turned her eyes back to the road, watching the lights passing on the highway, the steady pattern of lights blooming and fading away beginning to have a hypnotic effect on her. She closed her eyes for just a moment and opened them again, the light suddenly bright and harsh. She looked around, puzzled, and realized Mike had pulled to a stop at a gas station. They had only been driving for about half an hour, and she didn't understand how they could need a refill already. Looking over at the empty driver's seat and then glancing at the clock, the situation became clear: she had fallen asleep.

Jane stepped out of the car, stretching her legs and joining Mike over at the gas pump, rubbing her arms to ward off the early-morning chill.

"Where are we?" she asked with a yawn, fighting to drive the confusion of sleep from her mind.

"Wyoming. Gillette," Mike answered. "The tank wasn't too low yet, but I wanted to stop before we hit another stretch without many towns."

"Sorry," Jane apologized. "I was supposed to be keeping you company and I fell asleep on the job."

Mike let out a sharp laugh with a shake of his head.

"I didn't mean you had to be on duty for the whole ride," he teased.

"Besides, it's been a long day and it's the middle of the night. I'd be surprised if anyone could stay awake through all that without something to focus on, like driving."

She smiled, happy to be let off the hook but feeling guilty all the same.

"Speaking of driving, were you wanting to trade off as long as we're stopped?" she asked. "That was the other part of the deal, right?"

"If you don't mind trading off already," he agreed. "Are you sure that nap was enough?"

"Yeah," she said with a smile. "I usually get by on only a little sleep."

"Alright then," he said, tossing her the keys. "It's all yours."

Hanging up the nozzle and grabbing his receipt, Mike walked around to the passenger side while Jane settled behind the wheel. They pulled back onto the highway and Mike leaned his seat back, finding a more comfortable position. It only took a few minutes before Jane heard a deep, soft breathing coming from across the car, as Mike dropped off to sleep. She felt herself relax, letting go of the tension she'd been holding in her shoulders, still in disbelief that she was making this trek halfway across the country with a complete stranger.

"Maybe not a complete stranger," she thought to herself as she glanced over, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest before turning back to watch the road.

She had picked up bits and pieces about him during their conversation on the plane, forming a picture of Mike Wheeler. Son of an accountant, who followed in his father's footsteps, more to please his parents than because it was what he actually wanted to do. Creative and funny, kind but guarded. If she had to guess, he probably had a few close friends but rarely ventured outside their tight circle. She had gotten the impression it was out of character to be as bold and outgoing as he had been so far, something about her drawing him out.

In truth he had the same effect on her, and it left Jane more than a

little worried. She had to keep reminding herself she was only in this for the ride, desperate to get home and settle back into her routine. She'd be lying if she denied feeling some attraction to the man softly snoring in the passenger seat, but she couldn't run the risk of letting him in. Everyone leaves eventually, and the deeper you let them in, the worse it hurts, so she needed to keep that wall up.

A few hours later, she watched the sun rise steadily over the horizon as they continued through South Dakota. It disappeared quickly behind darkening clouds, and not long after, a gentle flurry of snow began to fall. Traffic slowed up a little as a layer began to take hold across the surface of the highway, but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle. She had been 12 the first time her father put her behind the wheel in an empty, snow-covered parking lot to get a feel for driving in it.

It was another hour before Mike finally woke up, his hair in even more disarray than usual. Jane watched out of the corner of her eye as he blinked hard against the morning light, made that much worse as it reflected off the freshly fallen snow.

"Good morning," she said gently, helping to remind him where he was.

"Good morning. When did it start snowing?" he asked.

"A little over an hour ago, right after sunrise."

"Sorry. I didn't mean for you to have to deal with that. Did you want me to take over?"

"Please, this is nothing," she said with a laugh. "The roads around Hawkins stay a lot worse than this most of the winter."

"Fair enough," he relented, hands raised in defeat. "How about some breakfast, at least. I'm starved."

"Now that's an offer I'll take you up on."

They watched the passing road signs until they spotted one for an IHOP at the next exit. Sitting in the warm diner, they watched the snow falling gently outside, sipping on coffee while the kitchen

worked on their order. Soon enough, the waitress walked over with a pair of plates: a Denver omelet for Mike and an absurdly large waffle with whipped cream and strawberries for Jane. With that first steamy bite, she felt like things were, for just a moment, going right with the world again. She also noticed Mike hesitant to start his own breakfast, something obviously weighing on his mind.

"I'm sorry," he began, sheepishly. "For yesterday morning. The waffles."

"What?" she asked, honestly forgetting he had been the one to snag the last pair at breakfast, the conference already feeling so far away.

"I didn't mean to take your waffles; I thought you had already come and gone," he went on. "I had seen it was what you grabbed every morning, always sitting there enjoying them with that content smile. If I had known, I never would have taken both. And if I could have come up with a way to offer you one, without coming off either disgusting or creepy...but, either way, I'm sorry."

Jane couldn't believe her ears, realizing that he had taken notice of her in more than just a passing glance. She knew it should have made her just a little uncomfortable that a complete stranger had been watching her over breakfast for the last few days, but somehow it didn't. What she felt instead, she couldn't pinpoint, or maybe it was a feeling she just didn't want to admit. In either case, she reached across the table and took hold of Mike's nervously shaking hand.

"It's okay. Really, it is," she consoled. "I'll admit, it threw off my day a little, but that was my own fault for oversleeping. You did nothing wrong, and that's sweet that you cared enough to even notice. I'm not really used to being noticed."

Mike looked up from his plate with a smile of relief as Jane pulled her hand back, a little embarrassed at her final admission. Breakfast passed with a lighter air, Jane trading a generous bite of her waffle for a scoop of Mike's eggs, and after a final stop at the restrooms, they hit the road again. Traffic was slow but steady on the highway, plows keeping the accumulation down to a manageable slush. While they drove, Jane pulled out her phone and checked their progress, Google giving them an updated drive-time now that everything was

moving slower in the snow.

"Going to make it in time for dinner?" Mike asked, playing it off with a laugh, but the eagerness in his voice impossible to hide.

"Yeah, I think so," she said. "Probably even time for a shower and a nap if things don't slow down much more."

She could practically watch the stress drain away from his face, relieved to know they were going to make it in time. She found herself wishing she could get as excited about a family gathering.

"Tell me about dinner." Jane asked, loving the excitement that crept into his voice when he got going on a long description. "What's Thanksgiving dinner like for the Wheelers?"

Sure enough, Mike fell quickly into a narrative as they drove, laying out the typical spread. He described his mother's insistence at making everything from scratch, and the preparations that would have started a few days ago. Her stuffing recipe that she refused to write down or divulge to anyone. How she had desperately tried to teach her children to cook, and how disastrously wrong Mike's first attempt at an apple pie had gone. Moving on from food, he dove into family. His older sister Nancy would be flying in from New York, while his little sister Holly still lived at home, a senior in high school. His Dad would spend the better part of the holiday asleep in his recliner. Grandpa Wheeler would be napping on the couch; like father, like son. Nana Wheeler would be in the kitchen, offering suggestions and assistance that his mother would diplomatically fend off.

He had a gift for descriptions, and Jane told him as much. She could almost smell the dinner he describe, feeling the warmth of the house as everyone gathered around the table. The food would be hot, the company loud, and she could picture Mike at the table, wedged between his sisters, plate piled high and fork at the ready.

"How about you?" Mike asked, pulling her out of the mental image. "What's a Hopper Thanksgiving like?"

"Quieter," she said, simply. "Just my Dad and I for as long as I can remember."

She went into her own description, not nearly as elaborate, not nearly as much to tell. Growing up, her father was never much of a cook. They spent plenty of nights splitting takeout from one place or another. Thanksgiving, though, he always managed to pull off and make something special. He had enough seniority in the police department that he never had to pull a holiday shift, so they got the whole day. Breakfast was simple, doughnuts and chocolate milk while they watched the Macy's parade on TV. Dinner was a basic menu, neither of them needing much; usually just a turkey, some mashed potatoes and gravy, store-bought rolls and a bakery pie. Even when a dish was an absolute disaster, like the year he set the oven wrong and the bird came out almost inedibly dry, somehow it was special.

"So just the two of you every year? No other family?" Mike asked, trying to picture such a quiet dinner.

"Yeah, just us," she confirmed, fighting with herself over the parts left unsaid.

It wasn't exactly a lie; it had been the two of them for so long, it really was hard to remember the time before. Besides, Mike was still practically a stranger, and only a temporary part of her life. What right did he have to know all the painful parts of her past? Still, she felt something inside urging her to tell the rest; that Mike was someone she could trust with her story.

"It wasn't always just the two of us," she said, breaking the silence.

"My Dad, well, he's not my birth father, but the only one I've ever known. He got me out of a bad situation when I was four. I don't really remember my birth mom much either, just little flashes. Anyway, he and his wife took me in, gave me a home. They had a daughter of their own already, Sara. She was few years younger than me, but they never made me feel like an outsider, like I didn't belong. We were sisters, blood or not. The four of us were a family."

Mike smiled at the happy description but withheld any comments, knowing the story had to have a downward arc coming. Jane took a deep breath before continuing.

"Sara got sick. Cancer. I didn't understand what that meant at the time, just that I had to wear a mask when we played together, around the same time that she lost all her hair. She fought hard - we all tried to fight hard for her - but by her sixth birthday, she was gone. Dad was strong for all of us, even though I could see how much he was hurting. Mom, she tried for a while, but she kind of fell apart. Then one day she was just gone. She left a note that said she loved us both, but she couldn't keep pretending everything was okay, when every sight and sound reminded her of Sara. Dad talked to her a few times on the phone over the years, enough to know she was doing alright and to let her know we would always be there if she came back. But that note was the last I ever heard from her. She didn't even..."

Jane wiped at her eyes, cutting the last detail short. It surprised her how easily the story flowed. There were only a few people who even knew about her past, but somehow she knew Mike wouldn't give her the usual response she got, that it happened a long time ago, and that she should be at peace with it by now.

"But we were okay, Dad and I. We still had each other and he took good care of me. He dealt with all my changes as a teenage girl, explaining things himself rather than pawning me off on a family friend or leaving it up to the school, even if we were both mortified at how embarrassing the talks got. He traded around schedules at work, picking up extra day shifts to stay off nights. He was always there to tuck me in at bedtime and tell me he loved me. There were always clean clothes for school the next day, and we never wanted for anything. He was an awful cook, but we never went hungry. So for as long as I can remember clearly, or care to remember, yeah, it's been just the two of us."

She looked up from where her hands fidgeted nervously in her lap, and realized Mike had pulled off onto the shoulder. He was turned in his seat, giving her his full attention.

"I'm so sorry," he said, reaching out to take hold of her hand. "I can't even begin to imagine what that would have been like, to go through all that. Your Dad sounds like an amazing man."

Jane found herself nodding gently, fighting off the burning sting in her eyes. Not quite sure what she was doing, she leaned in closer to

the center console. Mike followed suit, and she allowed him to wrap her in a hug as she buried her face in his shoulder, letting the tears come. In spite of the warnings screaming in her head, she had to admit it felt good to be held for a minute. She was so used to keeping people at an arms length so they couldn't hurt her. She knew that was why boyfriends never lasted long in high school, or after, and why she had all but given up on forming any meaningful connections.

They sat there long enough that a thin layer of snow had accumulated across the windshield, blocking out the rest of the world. When they finally separated, Jane realized Mike's eyes were red and misted over as well, her story tugging at his empathetic nature.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I'm not sure what came over me. I guess it's been a while since I've told anyone about all that."

"Hey, it's alright," he consoled, gently thumbing one final tear from her cheek.

"Thanks," she said quietly. Then, shaking her head and trying to pull a smile back on, she asked "mind if I take back over for a bit? I need something to focus on to clear my head again."

"Sure," he agreed with a smile of his own.

They got out and traded seats, taking a few minutes to brush the accumulated snow off the windows, and merged back on to the highway. They spent the afternoon quizzing each other on lighter topics - favorite music, authors, foods, places they had traveled.

"Favorite movie?" Jane asked, when it was her turn again. "The one you can recite by heart, and throw on TV telling yourself it will be background while you pay bills, and then you wind up sitting and watching the whole thing anyway."

When he didn't answer right away, Jane looked over and saw a deep crimson had risen to his cheeks.

"I don't think I can," he stammered. "It's a little embarrassing."

"Well now I have to know. Is it some sappy romance or something?"

His blush deepened, and she realized she was on the right track.

"I'll tell you what, I'll tell you mine at the same time. Count of three?"

Mike took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay."

"Alright," she smiled. "One. Two. Three."

"Princess Bride," they both said in unison, then after a brief silence, letting the other's answer sink in, they both broke up laughing.

"You're kidding," Jane accused.

"It's true," Mike admitted. "You've uncovered my deep, dark secret. I used to have a VHS copy that I watched so much, the tape actually wore out."

"Inconceivable," she grinned.

The next 20 miles were filled with recitation of their favorite lines, and the scenes that would get them choked up. Mike recited, word for word, Vizzini's rationalization of which goblet of wine had been poisoned. For that, she complimented his "dizzying intellect."

"Should we pull off for some dinner?" Mike asked, as the sky began to dim, feeling the need to get out of the car and stretch.

"As you wish," Jane smiled as they started watching the road signs, figuring out the choices for food.

The movie still fresh in her mind, she couldn't help but recall one final line. "When Westley said 'As you wish' what he really meant was 'I love you.'" For the thousandth time, she had to remind herself she couldn't fall for him. By this time tomorrow, he would be sitting down to dinner with his family, she would be home in Hawkins, and this little adventure would be a pleasant memory. Sure, he was funny, and smart, and sweet, and brought out a side she normally kept locked away from the world. To that end, he probably already had someone waiting for him back in Indianapolis; how could he not? She was certain he was just too polite to bring it up, not wanting to make her uncomfortable.

They got dinner and a fresh tank of gas, and finally had to admit they were both too exhausted to go on without a nap. Both had the idea of getting a motel room, but neither was brave enough to suggest it. In the end, they decided to pull into a rest area to grab a few hours of sleep before continuing. Jane took the back seat, having almost enough room to lay out straight - one of the few times her short stature worked out in her favor. Mike leaned the passenger seat back again, his head inches above her legs and they both shifted around to get comfortable.

"Goodnight Jane," he whispered into the darkness.

"Night Mike," she smiled, the whole thing feeling just a little like a childhood sleepover.

Jane drifted off to sleep picturing another world, another set of circumstances, where they might have known each other as children. Would they have been friends? More than friends? Would there have been a chance for them in some other life?

They couldn't say who roused first, but around three in the morning they found themselves awake and in need of trips to the restroom. Picking their way carefully across the parking lot, they headed their separate ways into the building. Mike found himself back out front first and waited for Jane before heading back to the car. The snow had stopped falling, but still lay thick across the ground and heavy in the trees. The whole world felt silent and still, sounds of the sparse traffic on the highway muffled. He took a deep breath of the cold, crisp air, trying to remember if he had ever felt such a moment of tranquility.

Whap!

A snowball struck his shoulder, tossing icy spray up along his neck and the side of his face. He turned in the direction of the attack and spotted Jane, a slushy chunk of snow slipping from her fingers as she grinned, holding back a laugh.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help myself. You were just standing there, and you didn't see me coming."

"I see how it is," he teased. "Attack a man when he's unarmed."

He stooped slowly, and Jane realized he was beginning to gather a retaliatory snowball of his own. She bent quickly and gathered another ball, glancing up to check his progress. The ball was formed, and cupped into his right hand as he stood, winding up to lob it in her direction. Jane ducked to one side, his toss missing her by inches as she threw her own snowball, this one catching him low in the chest. In a flash of white, she watched as he tossed the second snowball, concealed in his left hand, across to his right and lobbed an underhand shot that caught her on the hip.

Though they were under-dressed for the weather, they spent the next 10 minutes chasing each other around the deserted rest stop. Mike missed more shots than he landed, though Jane guessed he was doing it on purpose. In the end, they were drenched and shivering as they climbed back into the car, laughing hard as they turned the heat up as high as it would go.

Though they were both wide awake, they drove in silence through the remainder of the night, the darkness leaving them in a restful calm. The silence should have felt awkward, but there was a strange comfort to it. Jane spent the time wrestling with her thoughts. She had to keep reminding herself that in a few hours he would be dropping her off and this would all be over. The odds were good he wasn't feeling for her, what she found herself feeling toward him. Twice, she almost gave him her number, leaving open the possibility she might see him again, but she just couldn't do it. However she tried to rationalize it, she knew everyone left in the end. Saying goodbye to him in a few hours was going to be hard enough, she couldn't face getting to know him any more than she already had.

In the end, she made a bargain with herself. It was the sort of deal that always happened in romantic movies. If fate somehow brought them back together, she would take it as a sign, but until then this needed to be the end.

At a park-and-ride lot outside Hillsboro, IN, it was finally time to say goodbye. Mike offered, more than once, to drive her all the way to Hawkins, but Jane politely refused. It would add 45 minutes each direction, and he had still wanted to turn in the rental at the airport

and pick up his own car before heading to his parent's house. Having him know where she lived also felt like a cheat on the deal she had made with herself. When he realized she wasn't going to budge, Mike grudgingly agreed to the parking lot.

He helped her get her bags out of the trunk and then stood there awkwardly, not quite sure how to say goodbye, not really wanting to say goodbye. He offered to wait, but Jane insisted it wasn't necessary.

"My friend is just running a few minutes late, but she's almost here," she said, holding up her phone. "You should go, you've already lost enough time on my account."

"Okay, if you're sure." he smiled, flustered at her sudden change in demeanor and urgency to get rid of him. "This was fun. I hope I wasn't too boring to ride with."

Jane gave a laugh. "I had a good time, too. Really. And thank you for the ride, and for everything. This was a lot better than sleeping in the airport."

"And you'll be home in time for dinner," he added. "Just like I promised."

Surprising herself, she pulled him into a quick hug, needing to be close to him one more time, before backing away from the car with her suitcase, fighting off the pink blush rising in her cheeks. She waved a final goodbye as Mike got in the car and pulled back onto the highway. As he disappeared from sight, her phone dinged with a fresh notification, announcing the arrival of her Uber.

It was a quiet, uneventful ride the rest of the way home. There were no movie quotes tossed back and forth, but there also weren't any feelings that left her questioning whether she was making the right decision about opening herself up. The driver dropped her off with little ceremony, not even helping her unload her suitcase from the trunk, and then he, too, was gone. Climbing the steps to her apartment, she pulled out her keys and let herself in, locking the door again behind her.

"I'm home," she called out, leaning down to pet the fluffy orange cat

who came sauntering out of her bedroom.

Out on the highway, Mike was busy running over all the things he wished he'd been brave enough to say over the last two days. She hadn't mentioned a boyfriend, though he hadn't specifically asked either. He couldn't picture someone as amazing as her not having a boyfriend waiting at home. He would probably be joining her for Thanksgiving dinner, and she had just been too polite to include him in the list. Even if she wasn't seeing anyone, he knew she probably wasn't interested. He had faced an endless string of rejection in high school, and fared little better in college, but he couldn't deny the fact that he had felt a comfortable connection with her he'd never felt with anyone before. He had all but convinced himself to give her his number when they parted ways, leaving the ball in her court if she wanted to see him again, but then everything had happened so fast in the parking lot that he missed the chance.

There was something else nagging at the back of his mind; something he couldn't pin down. He thought back over their conversations and realized how guarded they had been. Sure, she had opened up about her past, probably in more detail than she usually told, but it had been in a calculated way, her words chosen carefully. She talked openly about the sister she lost, and the mother who left, but when it came to her father, she was cautious and reserved, perhaps even a little sad.

"He always made Thanksgiving special."

"He always encouraged me to follow my dreams."

"He was always there for me."

"It's been a tough year."

He couldn't put his finger on anything in particular, but suddenly he just knew she hadn't been making her way home to dinner with her father, she was only trying to get home. Had something happened to him, or were they just separated by distance? As much as he wanted to believe the later, he knew that couldn't be it. The way she talked about him, she would be doing whatever it took to be with him today, if she could. He wanted to turn around, to drive to Hawkins, but then what? It wasn't a huge town, but it would still be work to find her. If he actually showed up on her front porch, then what?

That would be terrifyingly creepy, and blow any chance of her talking to him.

Mike found he was getting choked up at the thought of her sitting home all alone, dealing with whatever the circumstances were, when he was suddenly pulled out of his thoughts by a car abruptly changing lanes in front of him. Mike slammed hard on the brakes, sending everything in the car sliding forward. From under the passenger seat rolled a small, brown wallet. He recognized it as Jane's, from when she pulled it out in Sioux Falls, insisting on springing for snacks while they stopped to fill up.

The universe had given him a way to find her, and a reason to go back, and he knew in his heart he had to take the chance. Pulling off to the shoulder of the highway, he picked up the wallet and flipped it open, looking for her ID. Not finding it in the usual windowed pocket, he started to worry that she might still have it in her jeans. When she had gone in for snacks, she had just grabbed her ID and credit card, rather than carrying the whole wallet in with her. He looked at the credit card slots, and breathed a sigh of relief; she had tucked the ID and card in together.

Fishing the ID out was difficult, the slots not built for more than one card, and in his struggle, a few dollars slipped out of the cash pocket. He picked those back up, realizing he was making a mess of things, and started to straighten them up to be slipped back in. One of the bills turned out to be a folded clipping from a news paper, and as much as he told himself to mind his own business, he carefully unfolded it and began to read.

The obituary for Officer James Hopper was beautifully written, by someone who clearly loved him more than anything in the world. It spoke of his love for his daughters - one surviving and one already gone. It detailed his love and service to the community where he was born and raised. Perhaps the detail that stung the most, and explained her eagerness to just be home, was the timing of the accident the clipping described. It had been one year ago, the day after Thanksgiving. He had stopped to help a motorist with a flat tire, letting them stay in their warm car while he made the swap. Another car, driving too fast for the icy conditions, took the corner wrong and spun out, pinning him between the two vehicles.

Mike's active imagination filled in the rest of the heartbreaking details. He could picture Jane, sitting curled up on the living room couch, some holiday movie playing on the TV. A knock at the door, and a pair of officers she had probably known all her life. She would read the look on their faces, and without a word, she would learn the devastating truth: that her father was gone.

Wiping at his eyes, Mike knew he had to go to her. Tucking the delicate newspaper clipping back where it had been, he jotted down her address and slipped her ID back where it belonged. After checking for a break in traffic, he pulled a quick u-turn and started toward Hawkins.

The shower had felt good, washing away two days of travel. Perhaps there had been something symbolic about it as well, washing away the experience. It had been a little adventure, and maybe something she needed at some level, but it was over. Mike was probably to his parents by now, in plenty of time to get ready for a big, loud, family dinner. Dressed in a comfortable pair of sweats, and an old Hawkins PD sweatshirt that was three sizes too big, she stepped into the kitchen, twisting her damp hair into a loose braid.

Pulling open the freezer door, she considered her options for dinner.

"What do you think, Chester? Chicken pot-pie, or chicken alfredo?" she asked, holding up a pair of boxes for the fluffy, orange tabby to inspect.

Batting at the box in her left hand, Jane let out a laugh, shooing the cat back off the counter.

"You just want me to have the pot-pie because you know I'll give you pieces of the crust."

She was just setting the pie in the microwave, checking the box for how long it was supposed to cook, when she heard a knock at the front door. She decided it was probably Mrs. Collins from downstairs, checking if she was home, or if she would need to let herself in to feed Chester again. Nothing could have prepared her, as she pulled open the front door, to find Mike standing there, shifting nervously

from one foot to the other. Her first thought was, if he really was a serial killer, he was playing the long-game and wasn't very good at it. The butterflies that swarmed in her stomach, on the other hand, told her she was undeniably glad to see him.

"Hi," she said, once it was clear Mike had suddenly gotten tongue-tied.

"Wallet," he blurted, holding out the lost accessory. "Sorry. I mean, I found your wallet in the car. So I brought it back. I hope that's alright."

"You found it!" she smiled in relief. "I thought I was going to have to spend the day tomorrow canceling things and ordering new cards."

She had discovered the missing wallet about 10 minutes after getting home, as she busied herself unpacking. She could picture one abrupt stop, where her purse had spilled, but she had thought she got everything gathered back in. The next day, she was going to call the Hertz office at the airport and see if they found it, and if not, a day on the phone dealing with the fallout. Now, thankfully, it looked like she wouldn't have to.

She watched as his face slowly fell, the look she had already come to recognize when he was wrestling with a thought.

"Jane, I'm so sorry."

She gave him a puzzled look, not sure what there could be to apologize for. He had gone out of his way to bring back her wallet, after all.

"When I was checking your ID for an address...I saw the article. I'm sorry if you didn't want me to know. I know it's none of my business, none of it was, but I wish you would have told me. I've been asking about him for the last two days and you've been putting on a brave face, talking about the good times. I'm just...I'm so sorry."

She wanted to be furious, to yell at him that he had no right to go through her things. He had no business trying to understand her, he had only just met her. He had never met her father, never knew the

amazing man who had done everything in his power to give her the life she deserved, and was now gone like everyone else. She wanted to scream at him to go, to leave her in peace to deal with life herself; she'd been doing it just fine so far.

She wanted to feel those things, to yell those things, but she just couldn't. She had only scratched the surface of who Mike Wheeler was, but she had opened up to him more in the last two days than she had to anyone else in her life, beyond her father of course. She had spent the last two days trying to pretend that the looming anniversary wasn't affecting her. She would bring flowers to his grave on Saturday, let herself cry and then keep moving forward. It had all been a lie of course, she wasn't fine, no matter how much she wanted to convince herself otherwise.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came, that familiar burn prickling at her eyes. As he had on the side of the road the day before, Mike pulled her into his arms, folding protectively around her as the tears fell amid gentle sobs. She hadn't realized before just how much taller than her he was, and how well she tucked against him, held tight in his arms. He was warm, and comfortable, and safe. He didn't try to fill the silence with empty murmurs of comfort, knowing there were no words that could make the situation better, only time and understanding.

She pulled back slowly, realizing there was now a dark, wet patch on the chest of his shirt. Wiping at her eyes, she took a shaky breath and tried to collect herself again.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For everything, really. I guess I've been holding all that in for a while, pretending things are fine."

"It's what you do for the people you care about," he said, immediately blushing at the admission.

The sentiment wasn't lost on Jane, and she couldn't help but think back over her own feelings, the ones she tried to deny had been building. She also remembered the promise she had made herself, to give things a chance if fate brought the two of them together again. She had assumed that would be some point in the future, not just a few hours after the fact. She had also promised her father she would

pursue the dreams that made her happy; maybe there was a chance that included Mike.

She wondered if she could really do it, to open herself up and let him into her life. It was an unfamiliar feeling, but she had actually been happy over the last two days, getting to know someone who seemed to genuinely understand her. Indianapolis wasn't really that far; maybe after the holiday weekend was over and he was done with family gatherings, they could meet up for a proper date.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, she suddenly realized how late it was already getting.

"We have to get you back on the road," she said frantically, "if you're going to make it in time for dinner."

"Jane, it's okay," he said softly. "This is more important."

"No, it's not," she said, unsettled emotions starting to bubble up again. "I know how excited you were to make it home for dinner, and now you might not make it all because I lost my wallet and you had to turn around, and bring it all the way back here. I'm sorry, this is all my fault."

"Jane. Deep breath," he said slowly, taking hold of her hands and staring deep in her eyes until she focused back into his. "It's okay. Dinner doesn't matter. This, right here; this is what matters. You matter. Leftovers will be there whenever I get to them, or not; it's just a meal. You shouldn't have to sit here by yourself, on Thanksgiving or any other day, trying to put on a brave face for the world if your hurting."

She was stunned at the outpouring, speechless that he was so immediately willing to give up what he had spoken so excitedly about for the last two days. And more stunning still, that it was her he was willing to give it up for.

"So, unless you truly don't want me here, I'd like to sit here with you for a while. We can talk, we can throw on a movie, or we can just sit here in silence, but I don't want you to feel alone, because you are too amazing to ever feel like that."

With a nod, and the barest hint of a smile, she stepped to the side and let him enter the apartment before closing the door behind them.

Jane Hopper was good at pushing people away, not letting them get deep into her life where they could hurt her when they left. Because everyone left, eventually. Some left by choice. Some left by circumstances beyond anyone's control. But in the end, everyone left.

Mike Wheeler stayed.